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UNCLAS HANOI 000916

SIPDIS

SENSITIVE

STATE FOR EAP/BCLTV AND DRL/IRF

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: [PHUM](#) [SOVI](#) [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [KIRF](#) [VM](#) [RELFREE](#) [HUMANR](#)

SUBJECT: HUE POLICE RUN INTERFERENCE IN MEETINGS WITH RELIGIOUS LEADERS

Ref: HCMC 76

11. (SBU) Summary: A political reporting trip to Hue by Embassy poloff and congenoff was marred by police obstruction of attempted meetings with non-recognized religious figures. These unfortunately successful attempts at blocking access are more damaging to GVN credibility on religious freedom issues than anything the activists likely would have said. End Summary

12. (U) During a joint Embassy-ConGen trip to Hue March 29-31 to assess the political environment and situation for religious believers in Hue (septels), poloff and congenoff attempted impromptu encounters with the Venerable Thich Tien Hanh of the technically illegal Unified Buddhist Church of Vietnam (whom a congenoff had visited in January - reftel) and Father Nguyen Huu Giai, a Catholic priest who has criticized the GVN and previously been affiliated with imprisoned cleric Father Nguyen Van Ly. Neither Thich Tien Hanh nor Father Giai is under any type of official detention.

13. (U) On March 29, when asked to drive to Thich Tien Hanh's pagoda, the rental car driver became visibly nervous, drove a long route out of town, feigned an engine breakdown, and then got out to make some phone calls. After much delay, he restarted the car and drove to an intersection near the pagoda in central Hue. There the road was blocked by what seemed clearly to be a carefully staged "traffic accident" -- an otherwise undamaged motorcycle lying on the road next to an otherwise undamaged car, with no sign of injured drivers or passengers. Several police on the scene insisted that the missionoffs leave the area immediately, and would not allow them to proceed around the "accident" on foot. A number of what appeared to be plainclothes police were also on the scene, including one who photographed the encounter. Missionoffs then called Thich Tien Hanh, who reported that police had also blocked the entrance to his pagoda.

14. (U) On March 30, missionoffs told the hired driver to go to a location close to the church of Father Giai, about 14km from Hue. The driver drove slowly through Hue, turning his hazard lights on at several occasions. After the vehicle was a short distance away from the town, traffic police drove up, pulled the car over, and - after a long, slow check - declared that the driver lacked "foreigner insurance." (Note: according to our GSO Motorpool staff, there is no such thing. End note) Only after an hour's delay did police allow the car and missionoffs to return to Hue, while insisting that the driver would have to return to the station immediately after dropping missionoffs at their hotel.

15. (SBU) Hue police also called a friend of the Embassy political assistant/trip translator in for questioning, after he met the Embassy FSN for dinner on March 29. He was not, however, detained or fined.

16. (SBU) Comment: The police actions in Hue, while almost comic in their efforts to be creative and not overtly heavy-handed, underscore the suspicion with which diplomats (especially U.S. political officers) are often seen, as well as the continuing sensitivity to non-orthodox religious figures who have been known to be critical of GVN policies. Our experience is that this tends to be notably more true outside Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City. Thich Tien Hanh's and Father Giai's criticisms are well known, and the visits would not likely have elicited any surprise new material. These successful attempts to restrict our access are instead more damaging to GVN credibility on religious freedom issues than any information the two probably would have provided. Next time, however, we will take an Embassy car and driver. PORTER